

“Cities are showing their greatest ambitions and willingness to defy climate change”

Cities have been greatly impacted by climate change, but many are taking action to mitigate its effects and adapt to the changing conditions. **Thomasz Gawlic**, Member of the 'International Climate Finance' unit at the Directorate-General for Climate Action (DG CLIMA), European Commission - focal Point for the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy (GCoM) - spoke at length about cities preparing climate action plans and the ways the Global Covenant of Mayors (GCoM) has been by their side. Abhishek Pandey, Editor of Urban Update, interviewed **Thomasz Gawlic** on diverse issues concerning cities around the world especially when they are greatly affected by climate change and the role of the European Green Deal in making an impact in Europe and elsewhere.

So, Thomas, I will start with the first question. Please introduce yourself to our audience and tell us about yourself and what you do.

Thank you, Abhishek. This is a great opportunity. My name is **Thomasz Gawlic**. I'm representing the Commission, Director General for Climate Action. There is a unit under which you may find a set of problems that we're trying to handle; not tackle but to handle. One of those is climate action in urban areas. This encompasses the Global Covenant of Mayors for which I am the focal point in our directorate, as you know since you are a part of the community. But let me give a little background of the initiative. GCoM has been there and grown to be the largest community of the cities, fighting against climate change, adapting to climate change, and also trying to adapt to the new circumstances related to energy security, and energy access. We are an alliance of over 12 and a half thousand cities across the world that represent more than one billion inhabitants of this beautiful planet and which I'm really proud about. It employs a lot of people working behind the scenes like we do. And I think it creates a great opportunity and also a great community for people that are devoted to climate action in the cities to reflect their dedication on the ground and help the cities as we phrase it 'pioneering in climate action'. As the cities are the centre of this action, without the cities, we would not achieve our targets and in Europe, we have ambitious targets. We have an increased target of at least 55 per cent reduction of emissions for 2030 and would like to be climate neutral by 2050. We also have other EU adaptation strategies, which are more action-oriented and there are also a number of other city initiatives. I'll not list them all right now, but let's maybe focus on GCoM and how GCoM is delivering because it is the largest alliance of cities in the world, it is something that we are proud of.

My question to you is about the European Green Deal which all the 27 European Unions have committed to turning into the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. So, what are the key components of this deal, how ambitious are you, and how are you going to do it, as you have to do things on the ground and there will be challenges.

I think, first of all, the most important one is the rule that the polluter pays for the harm that it does to the environment. So we are trying to pinpoint and trying to target the entities that are doing the harm. We tried to hold them accountable. The European green deal is a set of rules and guidelines that are trying to help us navigate through this very complex picture of different entities, and different institutions.

How difficult or how easy is it to achieve the vision of this deal?

Yes, it's a very good question because we have a number of experts working on different areas of that fight. I think the ones that we talked the most about are the emissions inventories. So there is, of course, a system of emissions of the so-called ETS (Emission Trading System) that we are trying to disseminate in other parts of the world. We also have put an effort into sharing regulations so that the sectors that are not covered by the emissions trading system, we're trying to encourage them to contribute to our collective fight. We also have mechanisms that are supposed to help communities go through that change because of this transformation. As we all know, it will not be easy for people for specific groups, and social groups, that there will be jobs that will, for instance, disappear. And we have to support these people. So, for this kind of thing, we also have funds so that we can help them. As you can see, the picture is very diverse. There are a number of pathways; we are trying to help people go through that transformation. And I think we've reached the last phase of preparation, the last phase of regulatory formulation. Now we face this; I think the most important stage is implementation. So we have to put that interaction to reflect that on the ground and this is the task for the coming years but also decades.

The Global Covenant of Mayors was created much before the Paris Agreement. Over the period of time, what has been your experience since you are handling GCoM affairs? How are cities responding and how are the changes happening on the ground?

As we said at the beginning, GCoM is a huge alliance and of course, it evolved over time. I think the cities have proven that they can take leadership. They proved that over the last decade and I could say that the majority of the actions were happening in the cities. We learned from the municipalities how to implement these actions. Also, very often the cities have set more ambitious targets than their own countries. I think what is our challenge for the following years is to get this work, very hard work that has been done over the last couple of years. Get this work embedded into a global picture; make every stakeholder, and every actor work together across different levels. I think in very high-level works, of course, but this would be our path going forward.

GCoM has evolved and now it is a very large alliance. How do you see cities taking this forward? What is your expectation from them?

It's a very difficult question. I mean, I've been trying to answer that myself over the last few months. I would be really happy. I would be very happy to see the work done by the cities being recognised. As putting this much effort is not done for nothing. Working for long hours through

good and bad days should not go wasted. I would love to be recognised appropriately and make this voice heard on important forums that we hold.

I am intrigued to know because we are new to this system. See, GCoM is a very big alliance so when this project finishes what will happen to GCoM? If it disappears then what will become of the hard work of people and finance invested into it. So my question is how all of us together can make it sustainable?

I agree with you that even the shortest gap in the functioning of this alliance would be very harmful, not only to the cities but specifically to the people that were working for us. And we don't want to let this effort get wasted. So, I agree with you on that. I think we might look into options on how this initiative can be made self-sustainable. At some point, maybe we should strengthen the platform for communication and I'm thinking out loud right now for the cities to exchange dialogues and communicate with each other. This kind of flow of information will let the spirit of the community for co-operation, which is self-sustaining, and it will work towards the goals. We might take this into consideration and I think the opportunity we've had over this week because we're in Brussels attending the GCoM open house, has been very instrumental for this kind of discussion. For me personally, I've had so many ideas and visions for the shape of this initiative, over the last week, I just need to note them down and then digest them a bit. I'll be happy to inform you further on how it's going on.

My second last question is which of the covenants has done really well? I know it is very difficult to ask a parent which one is your favourite child but still, I would like you to delve into it a little bit.

Of course, this is a difficult question. I think, globally the picture is very diverse and so, you can't really compare one region to one another. I think we should recognise the linkages that have been made, the local relationships and I think this has been done practically everywhere. We experience, of course, a high turnover of people, not only on the GCoM side but also on the city side. It gets difficult to maintain these relationships over time. And I think in this sense, GCoM is a one-of-a-kind alliance because we've been here for a very long time. We are the only community, the only group of cities that have been out there for a number of years and so I think, these relationships have been set up everywhere in the world. But in spite of or against the diversity, we can encounter that you've been really a great example for the other regions. The other regions have done well too, of course. If we're talking about how GCoM can evolve in the future, this could be the legacy and be the heritage that we leave. Whatever the future brings, this should not be wasted for sure.

My last question is quite general in nature because we know that cities are facing multiple challenges, whether you talk about climate change or water security. Many are talking about cities facing economic recession very soon. So, all these multiple challenges, how do you see that our cities are prepared, globally? Do you think that cities will come out of this, especially the problem of climate change?

I think so. I mean, as we said, cities are the hub for innovations. I'm really hopeful for the cities to bring up the solutions. Of course, again, the picture globally is very diverse. So, I think the challenges that the cities face are different across the world like, for example, comparing coastal cities to the cities further inland. What I think the major hurdle that they will have in moving forward would be to balance the mitigation and adaptation because as we spoke before, the mitigation ambition is already there in cities. They are showing the greatest ambition, and the greatest willingness to defy climate change, but they also have to cope with their daily issues which are more related to adaptation. They have to secure their communities, secure their people, buildings, and even their animals, including their own biodiversity. We should not forget about that. This is a very important element of that picture. I think the solutions will come but we will have to be very mindful about our daily activities. I feel a bit sorry for the municipalities that have to tackle these issues. As I said, cities are showing their greatest ambitions and willingness to defy climate change and we are open to help them. And as we have come here to help them, we are very open to suggestions and discussions on how this initiative might evolve and how we can further support the cities.

Any message from you to the regional covenants?

Just one message – a simple but important one. Thanks for your continuous work. As I said before, it's been tremendous, it's been terrific. And we're really proud of you. I think you should be proud of yourself too. So, just keep up the good work.